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TAGS: [PREL](#) [MARR](#) [PTER](#) [MOPS](#) [KPKO](#) [MCAP](#) [UNSC](#) [IS](#) [LE](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: HARIRI DESCRIBES CHALLENGES FACING LEBANESE ARMED FORCES

REF: BEIRUT 1153

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Although the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) had made "impressive" progress, it still requires training and equipment in order to undermine non-state actors, Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri told visiting DASD Colin Kahl and delegation on October 22. Kahl pushed for development of a long-term strategic vision for the LAF to organize donor assistance and rationalize procurement. He also underscored to Hariri the growing concern that Hizballah is re-arming. The Ambassador raised USG concerns regarding the need for the LAF to take a more aggressive stance on violations of UNSCR 1701 such as Kherbet Selim and the September 11 rocket launches. She emphasized that it is not simply a matter of the LAF investigating events after they occur, but of taking steps to prevent them. Hariri urged the USG to recognize that the poorly-equipped LAF could not challenge Hizballah, especially in light of Israeli violations of Lebanese sovereignty. Hariri described efforts to create a united Egyptian-Saudi-Turkish-Syrian front against Israeli policy. Hariri admitted his anger over rival Michel Aoun's public rejection of his cabinet proposal, but he pledged to push on. Hariri's reticence to engage on a comprehensive strategy for the LAF signals the challenges we will face going forward. End Summary.

HARIRI: A STRONG ARMY UNDERMINES NON-STATE ACTORS

¶2. (C) It was "high time" to rebuild the LAF, Hariri told visiting Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense (DASD) Kahl, BG Jeffrey Smith of the JCS, and the Ambassador on October 23 in a dinner at his Beit al-Wasat home. Although the LAF had made "impressive" progress since the end of Syrian domination in 2005, it still lacked training and equipment. A strong army would strengthen the central government and undermine non-state actors, he added, emphasizing that after he formed a government his job will be "fundraising" from regional partners to fund LAF needs. He predicted that Lebanon's friends would be willing to help in this effort. In order to show that Lebanon was also serious about addressing the LAF's needs, Hariri explained, he would increase the LAF's budget as well. Nevertheless, building institutions would not be "an easy ride," he assessed.

13. (C) DASD Kahl responded that developing a long-term strategic vision for the LAF was essential to organizing donor assistance and ensuring that investments in the LAF are rational and compatible. The USG, he said, is willing to send a team to Lebanon to help the LAF begin developing this strategy, since it would help us channel our military assistance. The Joint Military Commission (JMC) tentatively scheduled for February 10-12 would also be a productive venue to continue the dialogue, Kahl added.

CAN THE LAF CONFRONT HIZBALLAH?

14. (C) DASD Kahl underscored the growing concern in Washington that recent security incidents in south Lebanon are evidence of Hizballah re-arming. The Ambassador stressed that continuing support for the LAF and the GOL hinges on the LAF not merely investigating incidents such as Kerbet Selim, the September 11 rocket launches, and Tehr Felsay after they happen, but actively seeking to prevent them. Hariri responded he "totally agreed," but he urged the USG to recognize that the poorly equipped and poorly trained LAF was in no position to actively challenge Hizballah, which is a social and military phenomenon. Of the 15,000 LAF troops promised for the south, Hariri said, only about 5,000 are present -- compared to UNIFIL's 12,000 -- and they are too poorly equipped to respond quickly to incidents. "We must muscle in gently," he explained, adding that fears of Hizballah's taking over the LAF are unfounded because "Hizballah doesn't need the army's weapons" as it is supplied by Iran. The Ambassador noted that a delegation of four Hizballah MPs and Hizballah's security chief, Wafiq Safa, had

called on LAF Commander General Kahwagi earlier in the day, shortly before the arrival of the U.S. delegation. Hariri offered no comment but stated that one of his primary goals as Prime Minister would be to control Lebanon's borders. He called on the USG to recognize that arms smuggling to Hizballah takes place under Syrian sponsorship and thus Lebanon could not address the issue alone.

15. (C) Israeli violations of Lebanese air space and espionage devices on Lebanese soil (reftel) undermine the GOL's credibility vis-a-vis Hizballah, Hariri complained. "How can I argue with Hizballah's arms while Israel still occupies Ghajar?" he asked. Although Hizballah has no popular support for a second war, Hariri judged, it sustains itself by pointing to Israeli violations of Lebanese sovereignty. DASD Kahl emphasized that the USG argues to the GOI that the best way to undermine Hizballah is to strengthen the LAF and make progress on regional peace efforts. Kahl also underscored the hope that US rapprochement with Syria will improve its behavior toward Lebanon.

SEEKING UNITY ON REGIONAL PEACE

16. (C) The Arabs are interested in peace, but Israel is interested only in process in an effort to make the Arabs forget peace, Hariri stated. If Israel offers the Palestinians a fair solution, they will "resolve themselves" to it, Hariri believed, but there is no party in Israel that can offer such a deal. DASD Kahl clarified that the President is not interested in discussion for the sake of discussion and that the USG is trying to hold all sides accountable. Hariri responded that President Obama's efforts to be an honest broker are "admirable," but Arabs don't believe that the USG cannot drive the Israelis to the bargaining table, as it did at Camp David, Madrid and Oslo.

17. (C) "A friend is someone who tells you the truth," Hariri said, assessing that his main request of the USG was that it convince Israel that it was "headed toward a disaster." Equally important, Hariri explained, moderate Arab regimes are undermined by Israeli intransigence as their populations turned to "bin Laden's" ideology. Hariri reasoned that he had to "play ball with Syria" as part of an effort to create a united Egyptian-Saudi-Turkish-Syrian front against Israeli

intransigence. Although he said it was strange "to hear myself say that the Syrian opening is different this time," Hariri explained that the goal was to draw Syria to the Arab Peace Initiative while recognizing that it wouldn't leave Iran. Nevertheless, a Syrian move back toward the Arab fold would weaken Iran, which he described as a "paper tiger."

EFFORTS TO FORM CABINET WILL CONTINUE

¶8. (C) A visibly tired Hariri described himself as "very angry" at Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun's public rejection of his cabinet proposal on October 21. "We were so close; why did he go to the media? We could have discussed his concerns in private," he complained. Describing Aoun as "full of surprises," Hariri explained that he was analyzing the source of Aoun's outburst but that "it is important not to stop" efforts to form a government. Hariri outlined his hope to rebuild a relationship with Aoun to "pull his umbrella from the other parts of March 8." Although Hariri expressed a willingness to compromise "here and there for long-term goals," he re-emphasized his desire to build state institutions and protect the gains made to date, specifically the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon, the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, and free elections.

¶9. (C) COMMENT: Hariri's lack of substantive response concerning the need to develop a comprehensive strategy for the LAF signals the challenges we will face in convincing our Lebanese interlocutors that our relationship must move from a transactional level to a strategic, transformational one.
End Comment.

¶10. (U) This cable has been cleared by DASD Kahl.
SISON